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ABSTRACT

After presenting a chronological account of United States military documentary films from World War I through the Vietnam War, this paper reports on a study that compared the effectiveness of films prepared during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The first section, the chronological account, touches on such subjects as the production of World War I films by the Division of Pictures, established in 1918; the growth of the American documentary tradition that contributed to later U. S. military films; the development by Frank Capra, a Hollywood producer, of a series of World War II films entitled "Why We Fight" in response to the Pentagon's needs for propaganda; and the production of two subsequent propaganda films, "Why Korea" and "Why Vietnam." The second section discusses the research approach used in comparing results of analyses of "Why Korea" and "Why Vietnam" with results of a previous analysis of the "Why We Fight" series. In its third section, the paper reports observations made regarding visual, audio, and thematic aspects of the three films. It concludes that from an artistic point of view, "Why We Fight" is superior to both of the later films, providing a far richer visual experience and complementing the visual elements more effectively through music and narration. It also reports the generally negative response to "Why Vietnam." (GT)

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U. S. MILITARY DOCUMENTARY FILMS: A CHRONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

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Although the photographic documentation of American military conflict can be traced to the Civil War photographs of Mathew D. Brady, a chronology of U. S. military documentary films has its origins in World War I. The initial efforts in this area can be largely attributed to the Committee of Public Information, created in 1917, and given responsibility for the distribution of Signal Corps films (Creel, 1920). By March of 1918, a Division of Pictures was established within the Committee of Public Information, and the CPI began producing its own "feature" films, including Pershing's Crusaders, America's Answer, and Under Four Flags (Creel, 1920, p. 122). Subsequent activities of the CPI involved a weekly release entitled, "The Allied War Review," and a series of one-reel pictures produced under contract with commercial producers. When Congress abolished the CPI in June, 1919, it terminated the first on-going documentary film program.

During World War I the Signal Corps supervised the production of a wide variety of military training films, but when the war came to a close, its operations were reduced to the publicity functions of providing film footage to newsreels. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Signal Corps Pictorial Service experimented with new technological developments and produced a limited number of silent and sound films. As the United States drew closer to World War II and the peacetime Army grew in size, the Signal Corps once again responded to the demand for more training and general information films.

By the beginning of the 1940s, the American documentary film had been established. Coupled with several lesser known films, Pare Lorentz's 1936 classic, The Plow That Broke the Plains, gave direction and form to realism

in American motion pictures. Lorentz followed this successful effort with The River, which received even greater critical acclaim. The success of these works led to the creation of the short-lived U. S. Film Service which contributed a number of other noteworthy documentary films. Also of significance during this period were the "March of Time" newsreels and features that represented a new form of filmic journalism. Collectively, these various individual efforts can be seen as comprising the American documentary tradition which would contribute greatly to later U. S. military films.

As early as World War I, the military establishment became concerned with sustaining high morale among its fighting forces. However, a systematic approach to this problem was not formulated by the Army until late 1940. During 1941, several conferences of Army public relations personnel underscored the importance of increasing the War Department's efforts through the creation of a Morale Branch (later to become Special Services). The newly established Branch was immediately faced with the problem of easing growing resentment resulting from extension of the Selective Service Act which lengthened the draft term from one to two years. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor came accelerated pressures to mount a major offensive against domestic apathy and the increasingly effective propaganda machinery of the Nazis.

Clearly, the U.S. military personnel whose filmmaking experience had been limited to the creation of training films on machine gun operation, trench digging, and rifle cleaning, were no match for the Nazi film empire and the unusual talents of such individuals as Leni Riefenstahl. It was

Riefenstahl who had produced the ruthless propaganda piece, Triumph of the Will, aimed at dramatizing the superiority of the German race and the inevitable victory for the Führer. Top Pentagon officials quickly appealed to the patriotism of Hollywood's best producers, and commissioned some of the nation's most recognized talent as officers in the United States Army.

Most famous of the Hollywood chieftains to accept the Pentagon's invitation was Frank Capra, producer of such award-winning theatrical films as It Happened One Night, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, and You Can't Take It With You. Although Capra had never received acclaim for the making of a war film, he recognized that such box office successes as Guadalcanal Diary and Iwo Jima had responded to a general public need to feel that the war was morally justified. Accounts vary as to exactly how Capra was recruited and the specific mandate which he received, but it is known that he reported for duty on February 14, 1942, and was immediately named Chief of Special Services' Film Production Section (Bohn, 1968).

An understanding of the challenge facing Capra can be aided by reviewing the list of directives set forth to guide the Special Services' overall orientation program (Bohn, 1968, p. 99):

1. To foster a firm belief in the right for which we fight.
2. To foster a realization that we are up against a tough job.
3. To initiate a determined confidence in our own ability and the ability of our comrades to do the job that needs to be done.
4. To instill a feeling of confidence, insofar as is possible under the circumstances, in the integrity and fighting ability of our allies.

5. To create a resentment, based on knowledge of the facts, against our enemies who have made it necessary for us to fight.

6. To foster a belief that through military victory, the political achievement of a better world order is possible.

Despite the fact that Capra had not previously made a single documentary film, he produced a series of seven films which had the series title of "Why We Fight." The length of the films was to be set at 50-minutes so that troops could be brought in and ushered out of base theatres at one-hour intervals, but the actual times varied from film to film. The first film in the "Why We Fight" series was entitled Prelude to War, and contrasted the free world with the rise of totalitarian militarism from Japan's conquest of Manchuria to Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia. The Nazis Strike traced the rise of Hitler, the imposition of the Nazi dictatorship on Germany, and the series of conquests which culminated in the beginning of World War II. Divide and Conquer described Hitler's occupation of Denmark and Norway, the outflanking of the Maginot Line, and the forced surrender of France. Battle of Britain illustrated the gallant defense of Britain by the Royal Air Force at a time when the British were the only people fighting the Nazis. Battle of Russia provided an historical overview of the Russian people and their valiant struggles against the invading Nazis. Battle of China revealed how Japan's warlords made a total commitment to the conquest of China. And finally, War Comes to America disclosed the depth and variety of emotions with which Americans reacted to the traumatic events of the Nazi movement. It showed how American convictions had shifted from total non-involvement to total com-

mitment as the freedoms of democracy faced increasing danger. According to Capra (1971, p. 336), "This last film of the series was, and still is, one of the most graphic visual histories of the United States ever made."

The "Why We Fight" series received international acclaim, and General Marshall and other Pentagon leaders felt confident in the conclusion that, indeed, films were the answer. Thus, it is not surprising that subsequent military conflicts would provide a similar social climate which would suggest the need for additional filmmaking by other artists.

By the end of the 1940s, the United States once again found itself defending foreign soil in South Korea, and Edmund Reek, a staff producer for Twentieth-Century Fox Movietone News, was called upon to produce Why Korea. Unlike the earlier series, which had been developed under the direction of the Department of Defense, Why Korea was largely a civilian creation. In fact, with one significant exception, all of the people involved in the production were staff members of Metrotone News. The exception was one of the writers, Ulric Bell. He was a journalist, public servant, and founder of "United for World Organization, Inc." and "Fight for Freedom," groups which called for the establishment of a world authority with power to adjust disputes and use forceful means to prevent aggression. Bell also wrote the narrative drama, Freedom Diary, which held a striking resemblance to the world organization theme contained in the film. Why Korea was seen by world-wide audiences, but was banned in Burma because it was felt to violate that nation's neutralist policy toward Korea. The American movie industry paid tribute to the film by selecting it to receive an Academy Award for the "Best Documentary" of 1950.

Little more than a decade passed before the United States was drawn deeply into the military confrontations of Vietnam. Once again, the need to explain why American lives were being sacrificed in Southeast Asia was evident. On July, 1965, the office of Armed Forces Information and Education (AFIE), Department of Defense, concluded that a film should be produced which depicted the Johnson Administration's explanation of the war. Although early internal memoranda suggested such tentative titles as "Your Call to Duty" and "Why Me," the AFIE staff finally selected the title, Why Vietnam.

By December, 1965, Why Vietnam had been released to the Armed Forces and the American public. The Department of the Army's World-Wide Motion Picture Utilization Report for the six-month period ending September 30, 1966, indicated that the film had been screened 7,315 times, a new Army record. Similar data for the general public is less precise. However, military records reveal that there were thousands of nonprofit showings across the nation. In addition, a slightly edited version (to shorten the 32-minute film to 28 minutes 30 seconds) was aired nationally on the Big Picture, and was also incorporated into a three-part program, Places in the News, which was broadcast over WNDT (now WNET), New York. Why Vietnam remained in the film libraries of the Army and Air Force Pictorial Centers around the country until December, 1970, at which time it was declaired obsolete and withdrawn from distribution and destroyed.

Research Approach

Building on the basic research methodology of Kulper (1960) and Byrne (1965), Bohn (1968) completed an historical and descriptive analysis of the

"Why We Fight" series. The present study is viewed by the authors as a continuation of Bohn's investigation, and hence utilizes his research approach. The findings resulting from the "Why We Fight" analysis were compared to similar information generated for Why Korea and Why Vietnam.

The historical and contextual portion of this effort relies on original documents secured from the office of Armed Forces Information and Education, Department of Defense; correspondence with more than fifty individuals who were either directly or indirectly involved in the preparation of Why Korea and Why Vietnam; personal interviews with selected persons associated with the films; selected materials from the files of Ulric Bell; and published works drawn from books, magazines and newspaper articles.

A separate thematic and shot analysis was prepared through the use of the following method. First, a detailed transcript containing both the narrative and visual/auditory elements for each film was completed. The films also received repeated inspection using a hand viewer. Work sheets were assembled on which each shot was recorded in numerical sequence. Included on these sheets were shot length, camera angle, lens angle, camera movement, content of shot, transitions, and special optical effects. In other words, the two films were analyzed for elements which comprise both the individual shots and the editing techniques that established patterns and relationships between shots. The work sheets, then, served as detailed shooting scripts which provided the basis for the film analysis. Categories were not predetermined, but rather were generated in response to the data revealed through the analysis.

The sound track of each film was also analyzed. An audio tape was made of each film and used in conjunction with the shot sequences appearing on the work sheets. By critically listening to the sound track, both independently and in concert with the visual elements, a basic audio-visual relationship was established for each film.

Since the "Why We Fight" series consists of seven separate films, a single film was selected from the series for the purpose of direct comparisons with Why Korea and Why Vietnam. A review of the seven films led to the selection of the final documentary in the series, War Comes to America. This decision was based upon the fact that War Comes to America paralleled most closely the overall focus of the two later efforts; that is, an historically-based explanation of how and why American combat forces became directly involved in a military conflict with a foreign power who initiated the aggression, thereby threatening world peace and American ideals. To emphasize, however, that War Comes to America also represents the culmination of an entire series and hence embodies the objectives and orientation of a broader undertaking, the authors have chosen to refer to this single film in later discussions as Why We Fight.

It should also be noted that each film is of a different length, thus preventing direct temporal comparisons which might provide additional insights into the decision-making process employed by each producer. The first film, Why We Fight (War Comes to America), is approximately twice as long as the other two, running 63 minutes. Why Korea is 33 minutes in length, and, as stated earlier, the original version of Why Vietnam runs 32 minutes.

Discussion

Since this is a "Media Forum" presentation rather than a traditional convention paper, we have departed from the customary practice of including a separate results section in this written summary. The findings and explication portion of this program are tied directly to the media presentation which is to follow. It should also be emphasized at the offset of this discussion that neither this paper nor the oral presentation is viewed as a finished product. Our purpose in requesting an opportunity to participate in "Media Forum" was to share a research project which is currently in progress, and which would benefit from the critical comments and recommendations of colleagues who share similar academic interests. The remainder of this section is devoted to a brief summation of our observations regarding the visual, auditory and thematic aspects of the three films.

Visual Aspects

All three films were produced in black-and-white and made extensive use of newsreel or stock footage. Why Korea and Why Vietnam are most similar in that they back many of the visual elements found in Why We Fight. For example, neither Why Korea nor Why Vietnam make much use of "staged" or "theatrical" shots, but rather consist largely of newsreel film. In contrast, Why We Fight makes fairly extensive use of existing footage from theatrical films, or original footage produced especially for the series. As a result, Why We Fight gives the appearance of a film which was more carefully conceived, and which affords a more deliberate integration of visuals with the narrative.

Excluding the unintentional movement of the hand-held camera, both Why Korea and Why Vietnam exhibit limited camera movement and can be described as "static." However, changes in some cinematic techniques during the 15-year lapse between the creation of the two films are clearly revealed. The "zoom" is employed only three times in Why Korea, whereas it is the fourth most frequently used technique to create movement in Why Vietnam. As one would expect, the most frequently used transitional device for both films is the "cut," but the novelty of special effects during the period of Why Korea resulted in a significantly higher proportion of horizontal and vertical wiper and dissolves. The only special effect to appear in Why Vietnam which was not employed to a larger degree in Why Korea is that of the "freeze frame." This cinematic technique was used sixteen times in Why Vietnam, while not at all in Why Korea.

"Bohn (1968) argues that one of the greatest strengths of the entire "Why We Fight" series is the visual editing which illustrates Capra's creative touch. This contention is dramatically supported by a direct comparison of the editing across these three films. While all three films reveal a respectable degree of precision in the editing process, Why We Fight is clearly superior to the other two. It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the analysis, that the combined talents of the "Why We Fight" staff are vividly illustrated. While not to detract from the individuals who contributed to the production of Why Korea and Why Vietnam, the artistry revealed through the visual editing of Why We Fight gives evidence of the level of cinematic achievement which had been reached by Capra and his associates in 1945.

Looking at the subject matter of all three films, one can easily conclude that it is highly similar. Reliance on newsreel coverage of women, children, foreign troops and civilians, political figures, etc., results in the use of many shots which could be interchanged between the films. The animated sequences which appear in Why We Fight (produced by Walt Disney Studios) are superior to those employed in Why Korea. Interestingly, Why Vietnam failed to use the animated maps which appear central to the visual illustration of military aggression in both Why We Fight and Why Korea.

In general, an analysis of the visual production elements and pictorial content of Why Korea and Why Vietnam reveals a striking similarity which can undoubtedly be traced to the conventions set forth in Why We Fight. Just as D. W. Griffith is credited with establishing the formula for depicting battle scenes in Birth of a Nation, Capra's Why We Fight had an obvious impact on the visual structure of Why Korea and Why Vietnam.

Audio Aspects

The three primary elements in the auditory analysis of the films are narration/voiced actualities, music, and natural sounds. Both Why Korea and Why Vietnam utilized a single narrator, whereas Why We Fight used two. The announcing style of the principal narrator for each film can be described as "straight," "unemotional," and "authoritative." The inclusion of a second "folksy" narrator who represents the subjective perspective of the audience gives Why We Fight greater variety. This variety is not only suggested in terms of a change in voice quality and narrator style, but also in the shift of mood which is reinforced by the visual elements and the script

itself. Of the three films, Why Korea makes the most use of voiced actualities, by political figures, and hence is least effective in maintaining a consistently high interest level. The pacing and tempo of Why Vietnam appears to be interrupted by the political statements of our national leaders, especially those obviously staged specifically for the film camera.

The musical scores for all three films were designed to reinforce their respective visual and narrative elements. However, the musical score written for Why We Fight integrates original instrumental and vocal portions which are carefully matched to the visual scenes. For example, a chorus sings "My Country 'Tis of Thee" as an animated map illustrates the growth of the United States. A skillful version of "Rhapsody in Blue" accompanies an equally well-edited montage of scenes which depict the American way of life. In another instance, a woman sings "The Last Time I Saw Paris" while the camera reveals the striking contrasts resulting from German occupation. Nowhere in Why Korea or Why Vietnam does the music achieve the dominance which it is granted in Why We Fight.

Again, all three films employ natural sounds, especially those associated with military combat. The image of war is reinforced through the sounds of bombs dropping, rockets exploding, machine guns firing, and tanks crashing through barriers. This montage of sound probably has its roots in the theatrical films of the World War II period. The technique was borrowed by Capra, and used successfully in all three films. What might be labeled as theatrical sound effects are used most often in Why We Fight.

Thematic Aspects

That all three films were designed to justify American military actions and to motivate our fighting men to uphold American ideals appears obvious. There are, however, some distinct differences in the way the films attempt to achieve these objectives. While all three films underscore the belief that Americans hate war, desire no expansion of our territorial holdings, and enter into military conflict with great reluctance, the producers apparently perceived the strength of their arguments differently. In Why We Fight a dominant theme is that the war was forced upon us and hence our involvement came in direct response to military aggression against the United States. In Why Korea and Why Vietnam the case must be made that acts of aggression against foreign people in far away places can have future consequences which threaten American freedoms. Whereas the argument in Why Korea appeared entirely plausible, Why Vietnam shifted the emphasis toward American pride and honor. We had promised to help these far away countries, and we could not break our solemn word: "We will not surrender and we will not retreat." Within the framework of a "global communist conspiracy" it is stated repeatedly that we have learned the bitter lesson that appeasement is an invitation to further aggression.

Why Vietnam is more subtle in its references to historical events. Possibly the events were not as clear cut to the Why Vietnam staff as they were to those involved in the creation of Why Korea. With reference to the Hitler and Chamberline meeting of 1938, the film says ". . . a shortcut to disaster. But even then this was no new lesson. It had stared us in the

face with Mussolini in Ethiopia." President Johnson is also shown giving historical justification for the events of the war when he states," . . . it echos clearly from the painful lessons of half a century. Three times in my lifetime, in two World Wars and in Korea, Americans have gone to far lands to fight for freedom." An even more subtle reference to historical events leading to war in Vietnam is stated as follows: ". . . but even as the people of the South build, North Vietnam is creating in their villages, political action centers with trained agitators infiltrated from the North — often in the disguise of refugees." Thus, each of the wars is brought to the present, but inherent in the present is implied historical justification for the war.

In Why Korea, justification for actual retaliation is noted by such phrases as, "It was an unprovoked and willful aggression by . . . North Korea," and "The Soviet Union . . . used every conceivable tactic to stall, confuse and obstruct the efforts to stop the war." Another seventeen statements in Why Korea contain similar justifications. By contrast, twenty-seven statements offering justification for the ongoing war in Why Vietnam provide a careful rationalization for each American "escalation" of the war. An SOF segment reveals President Johnson stating, "Renewed hostile action against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply." The narrator adds at a later point that, "We seek no wider war, but there is no relenting on the part of the North. In this one captured shipment of Viet Cong arms, there are a million rounds of small arms ammunition, and there's no doubt about the source." This pattern continues with seven such references

by Dean Rusk to "growing communist aggression," "rising tide of infiltration," and the "communist refusal to talk" and "to negotiate." With less historical support for the war in Why Vietnam, scriptwriters apparently thought it necessary to emphasize justification of recent events.

The pattern of the global conspiracy as depicted in both films essentially follows the same chronology with Why Vietnam placing an emphasis on post Korean War communist activities. Why Vietnam switches leadership of the conspiracy from Russia to China. In Why Korea, Russia is blamed for the entire global conspiracy and especially for the Korean War, while in Why Vietnam, Russia is never even mentioned. The fact that Russia is not mentioned in Why Vietnam reflects the United States policy change toward Russia. This is evidenced by a more judicious use of name calling in Why Vietnam to avoid negative references directed specifically toward Russia. "Aggression was again unleashed — this time across the 38th parallel in Korea." This "aggression" was pointedly Russian inspired in Why Korea.

Conclusions

Despite the preliminary stage of this research, it can be stated with confidence that from an artistic or aesthetic standpoint Why We Fight is superior to either Why Korea and Why Vietnam. In fact, if one were to develop a continuum or rating scale to illustrate relative positions of the three filmic endeavors, Why We Fight and Why Vietnam would represent divergent points with Why Korea somewhere between them.

As suggested in the earlier discussion, Why We Fight provides a far richer visual experience than either of the later films. Both the visual

editing and the integration of visual elements with the sound track is most successfully achieved in Why We Fight. The tempo and pacing of this film is enhanced by the fact that although it is approximately twice as long as the other two, it contains more than three times the number of separate camera shots (WWF=1406, WK = 486, WV = 392).

Several critical reviews of the "Why We Fight" series criticized Capra for his use of staged or theatrical shots which were seen as unduly verbose and super patriotic. While there is no question that the films are susceptible to this criticism, one can also argue that the series was probably an appropriate treatment for the target audience. Just as we can critique radio programs of the same period for their stylized presentations and theatrical conventions, the audiences of the late 1930s and early 1940s found the programming both acceptable and enjoyable. If Capra is to be criticized for his use of staged shots and clips from theatrical films, it should not be that it was inappropriate for his audience, but that it was inconsistent with one's definition of documentary film.

It has also been suggested that Why We Fight suffered from too frequent duplication of information presented both visually and aurally. Again, it is true that such duplication occasionally exists, but compared to Why Korea and Why Vietnam, Why We Fight is visually rich. Far more vital information is provided in the visuals of Why We Fight than the other two films. In fact, when one listens to the sound tracks of Why Korea and Why Vietnam it is not difficult to begin believing that it is a radio documentary which needs no visualization. The music and narration of Why We Fight would also appear

to be more effective in terms of setting a mood and complementing the visual elements.

Although Why We Fight did not result in major shifts of opinion regarding the war effort, research has indicated that it was an effective instructional tool, with viewers demonstrating long-term recall of the information presented. The level of success achieved by Why We Fight and Why Korea would probably not have been possible had Americans strongly opposed U. S. involvement in World War II and the Korean War. Both films employed highly emotional themes to arouse a sense of patriotism and increase one's commitment to the war effort and its accompanying sacrifices. For the most part, Americans held what might be described as a positive predisposition toward "justified" U. S. military involvement, and merely needed the appropriate arguments to permit them to reach their own conclusions that the war was necessary.

In the case of Why Vietnam, the social climate was quite different. Unlike the receptive military personnel and the general public who viewed Why We Fight and Why Korea, a significant portion of the audience for Why Vietnam greeted the film with strong hostility. Letters from outraged Americans forced Congressional leaders and White House officials to direct inquiries to the Department of Defense and AFIE. Transcripts of the film floated through government offices, and television stations received requests from groups and individuals who desired an opportunity to present an opposing point of view. Newspaper and magazine accounts of the film were generally negative, with Saturday Review suggesting that the lies and falsehoods depicted in Why Vietnam were comparable to George Orwell's futuristic "Ministry of

Truth." AFIE had not properly gauged the sophistication and attitudes of its target audience. Whereas Why We Fight and Why Korea had been the Pentagon's answer to earlier needs for propaganda, Why Vietnam merely served to create new problems for which there were no easy solutions. If Why Korea and Why Vietnam are representative of U. S. military documentary films during the past several decades, it seems reasonable to conclude that this important form of communication has not been advanced by our armed forces since the completion of the "Why We Fight" series in 1945.

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